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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 000258

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CEN, INL/LP, INR, AND DS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#) [SNAR](#) [ASEC](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: GUNMEN SHOOT CAR OF PRESIDENT OF HONDURAN CONGRESS  
PEPE LOBO; ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION OR ROBBERY?

REF: A. 03 TEGUCIGALPA 2301

[1](#)B. 03 TEGUCIGALPA 1904

[1](#)C. 03 TEGUCIGALPA 882

Classified By: Political Counselor Francisco Palmieri;  
Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Unknown gunmen shot at the car of Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, President of Congress, February 1. Lobo was not in the car at the time, and his driver, two aides, a bodyguard, and an army officer in the car were unhurt. Police believe that the attack was either (a) linked to threats (made public January 24) targeting Lobo for assassination by gang members due to his strong support for a controversial anti-gang law, or (b) an attempted robbery and not a targeted attack. Whether or not this attack was an attempt to assassinate Lobo, the GOH is prudently taking seriously threats of violence by gangs/narcotraffickers toward senior GOH officials. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU/NOFORN) Unknown gunmen using AK-47s shot at the car of Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, President of Congress, the morning of February 1 on Highway 15, the road from Tegucigalpa to Juticalpa, near kilometer 93 on the border of the Departments of Francisco Morazan and Olancho. Unlike Highways 39 and 41 in Olancho that are subject to highway robbery (as mentioned in the Consular Information Sheet), this stretch of Highway 15 is heavily traveled and not known for banditry. Police reportedly found four AK-47 shell casings at the crime scene. Lobo was not in the Chevrolet Suburban at the time, and his driver, two aides, a bodyguard, and an army second lieutenant in the car were unhurt. Lobo is entitled to security as president of Congress, but it is unclear why an army officer was in the car. There are conflicting reports, some of which indicate that Lobo had planned to make the trip by road but at the last minute went by helicopter instead, thus avoiding the attack.

[1](#)3. (U) Police believe that the attack may be linked to threats, made public January 24, that Lobo had been targeted for assassination by gang members due to his strong support for a controversial anti-gang law. On August 8, the Honduran National Congress approved a bill banning membership in street gangs and other groups that associate for the purpose of committing crimes. The bill prescribed prison terms for those convicted of being gang members, with sentences ranging from three to 12 years depending on the individual's level of involvement and seniority (ref B). Press reports indicated that the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Defense believed the threats to be credible.

[1](#)4. (S) However, Minister of Public Security Oscar Alvarez told Law Enforcement Assistance Coordinator at the time that, while Lobo had been advised to take the threats seriously, Alvarez did not believe the threats were credible. (Note: It would be unusual for a politician to receive credible deaths threats linked to a general political action, as opposed to personal involvement in a controversial private issue. It is worth noting that over the last six months there have been several allegations and/or incidents involving members of Lobo's extended family involving narco-related crime. While Lobo himself has not been implicated in these allegations/incidents, they could potentially put him at risk for a targeted killing. End Note.)

[1](#)5. (U) An alternate theory that police are investigating is that his car was targeted by bandits, similar to the April 10, 2003, attack on the advance car of First Lady Aguas Ocana de Maduro (ref C), and that Lobo himself was not a target. Police are investigating both theories.

[1](#)6. (U) The anti-gang law has been popular with the public, but has been criticized by human rights organizations and challenged as unconstitutional (so far unsuccessfully, with two separate cases being dismissed). The Maduro Administration has trumpeted the law as being key to recent successes in reducing the number of violent crimes, including murder (ref A). Observers have estimated there are upwards of 100,000 gang members and associates, with two main gangs being Mara Salvatrucha and 18 (diez y ocho), and have pinned much of the blame for the country's astronomical murder rates

and violent narcotrafficking on gangs.

17. (U) Lobo himself has used the law's popularity as a launching pad for his nascent presidential campaign. He is considered by most observers and polls to be running second to Tegucigalpa Mayor Miguel Pastor for the National Party presidential slot for the election in 2005. President Ricardo Maduro, a Nationalist Party member, cannot run for reelection.

18. (C) Comment: Whether or not this attack was an attempt to assassinate Pepe Lobo, the GOH is right to take threats of violence by gangs/narcotraffickers toward Lobo (and senior Ministry of Public Security officials) seriously, even if this specific threat may not have been credible. A culture of impunity fueled by a weak rule of law, gang violence, and the pervasive influence of narco-corruption helps make Honduras a very violent country. Meanwhile, the anti-gang law has become a cornerstone of the Maduro Administration's war on crime. It remains to be seen, however, if short-term gains against gangs will mean a long-term improvement in reducing the level of violence. End Comment.  
PALMER